

The proposed plan to redirect 10 percent of flights now scheduled for Philadelphia International Airport to nearby Atlantic City International Airport introduced by Congressmen Rob Andrews, D-N.J., and Joe Sestak, D-Pa., is based on the ideal of regionalism and good old common sense. Sens. Frank Lautenberg and U.S. Rep. Frank LoBiondo think so, too.

Presently, Atlantic City International Airport (ACY) conducts 120,000 operations per year from its Egg Harbor Township site just off the Atlantic City Expressway and Garden State Parkway and 60 miles from the Walt Whitman and Ben Franklin Bridges into Philadelphia.

The results of crowded airspace around Philadelphia International Airport (PHL), as well as airspace around Newark Liberty International Airport, JFK and LaGuardia in New York, are well documented. Planes queuing up to take off and land have generated complaints by travelers to the extent that a "Travelers Bill of Rights" is under consideration.

Atlantic City International Airport has earned its reputation as an efficient airport with little to no wait times because the airport owns its airspace and does not have to circle aircraft over neighborhoods while waiting to be queued into the busy air system over Philadelphia, North Jersey and New York. By contrast, PHL has one of the highest wait times in the region at 26 minutes to ACY's record 14 minutes, largely due to the distance and actual time it takes an aircraft to ground taxi onto the runway and take off.

In order to accommodate existing flights, new air service and larger aircraft, PHL must spend close to a billion to lengthen existing and build new runways in addition to the millions already invested to expand and upgrade terminals. ACY presently has the capacity to handle more than the 50,000 flights proposed for diversion by Congressmen Andrews and Sestak with only an additional \$1 million added to its operating budget for additional staffing requirements which would create jobs and economic development for a fraction of the PHL investment while relieving PHL of capacity constraints.

Regionalism is a reality in other U.S. markets in which multiple airports serve the same metropolitan area. Travelers to the Boston area can fly directly into the larger Logan Airport or, for significantly lower fares, can fly into Providence, R.I., or Manchester, N.H., and complete their trip to Boston by ground. In much the same way, a regional approach toward air service makes sense for the Philadelphia region.

Atlantic City is a destination for 36 million people annually and has tremendous capacity to grow if direct air service is available. Certainly it's about opening up new markets for Atlantic City, but it's also about airlines continuing to meet Philadelphia area needs while providing service to a major East Coast destination. It's also a wise business strategy for airlines as South Jersey is a proven growth area with the Greater Philadelphia area, which is the second largest populated region on the East Coast and is accessible to 100 million people within a day trip.

Diverting 50,000 flights to ACY will not negatively impact the neighborhoods surrounding the airport as flights fly over the ocean for the most part and the airport's footprint is so large that the noise from existing and additional flights would be contained within the airport property. Noise from activity at PHL is dispersed into the surrounding community because the airport site is not large enough to contain it.

We recognize that the concerns expressed by Egg Harbor and Hamilton Township officials must be vetted and addressed. The airport's efforts to attract new air service are supported by New Jersey's representatives in Washington, state legislators and municipal leaders in southern New Jersey.

They recognize that the region's economy will only benefit by the addition of more direct air service to ACY as a means to support the gaming and entertainment industry, the promotion of meetings and conventions to Atlantic City and the regional business community as a whole.

We also appreciate that the FAA does not at this time have the authority to dictate to airlines which airport they should use and that those decisions are based on market demand. Congressmen Andrews and Sestak have approached the air traffic situation with a problem-solving approach that makes use of available resources, meets the needs of the traveling public and addresses quality of life issues caused by the present airspace redesign project.

-- Bart Mueller is executive director of the South Jersey Transportation Authority.